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Now Playing on Apple's iTunes: Adult-Oriented Podcasts

By VAUHINI VARA
 THE WALL STREET JOURNAL ONLINE
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Now available for download through iTunes: raunchy sex banter, erotic storytelling sessions and reviews of pornographic Web sites.

Last month, [Apple Computer](#) Inc.'s online music store launched a directory of podcasts -- audio shows that can be downloaded free from the Internet and usually feature amateurs discussing mainstream topics like cars, sports and independent music. At the same time, it also opened its doors to a racier genre of audio files that some are calling "porncasts."

With names like "Fetish Flame" and "Open Source Sex," the adult podcasts are often created by self-proclaimed sex experts who have cheap recording software, a bit of free time and little or nothing in the way of professional radio experience. Many of the rambling audio shows focus on the creators' sex lives, often punctuated with stutters, long pauses and the occasional, "Um, so, what should we talk about next?"

As podcasting reaches a more mainstream audience, the more risque audio shows -- and Apple's role in distributing them -- could come under greater scrutiny. Apple declined to say whether any of its users have complained about the adult podcasts, which can be downloaded by anyone regardless of age. The company said it could potentially pull programs that it deems too explicit, but declined to say whether it has done so yet.

Apple allows podcasters to submit their own audio shows for inclusion in iTunes. Those who discuss adult material are asked to mark their podcasts as "explicit" by checking a box; Apple spokeswoman Natalie Kerris said the service has no specific guidelines as to what constitutes explicit content. She said Apple tries to review as many submissions as it can for "really obvious" adult content. Listeners can click on a button marked "Report a Concern" if they feel that a podcast isn't marked as explicit and should be. "If for some reason we miss it, customers usually catch it," Ms. Kerris said.

Ted Schadler, an analyst at Forrester Research who covers consumer technology and the music industry, says there are risks in Apple's willingness to accept content from amateur users. "Apple needs to be careful to protect its brand here," he said. "The editorial function is just getting more and more important." Apple declined to comment.

Podcasts are named after Apple's popular iPod music player, but they can be played on almost any portable music player, or on a computer. Apple doesn't actually host the broadcasts on its Web site, but it allows users to link to them through its software.

Though Apple doesn't generate any revenue from the podcasts, it has other motivations to promote them: In addition to promoting iPods, the company hopes the free directory will encourage greater use of its iTunes software, which is closely linked to its music store. The company

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said it has already handled five million podcast subscriptions for its users.

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As for those behind the adult broadcasts, there are also distinct draws. Because they are transmitted through the Internet, podcasts are free of the Federal Communication Commission's indecency rules that govern traditional radio broadcasts. The FCC's restrictions on profanity and explicit sex talk played a role in Howard Stern's decision last year to move his show to [Sirius Satellite Radio](#) Inc., which has no content restrictions.

One of the most popular podcasts tagged as "explicit" on iTunes is "Open Source Sex," an audio show hosted by a woman called Violet Blue, who has written several sex books. A frequent guest on radio talk shows, Ms. Blue is often gently reminded before going on the air to keep her language G-rated and her anatomy discussions vague.

On her podcast, meanwhile, nearly anything goes. In one episode, she read a story called "The Last Deduction," by erotica writer Alison Tyler, about an encounter between a novelist and her tax auditor. ("He had short dark hair, stone-colored eyes and a sleek, athletic build that was apparent even with his suit on.")

While the distribution of adult material is big business on the Internet, many of the people behind the racy podcasts are often seeking little more than fame. There are no fees for listening to the broadcasts, though some have hooked up with sponsors to generate revenue.

On her weekly "MXL Podcast" -- the name stands for "maximum libido" -- Virginia Bytheway breathily reads erotic fiction and answers questions emailed by listeners about various racy acts, often using eyebrow-raising language. Ms. Bytheway, a 48-year-old former phone-sex operator, records her podcasts using her computer at her Montreal home, then sends them to Didier Sicaud, a psychologist who produces the podcasts.

Ms. Bytheway isn't paid for her work, but Mr. Sicaud uses her podcast to drive traffic to a Web site that advertises his sex-therapy services. In April, meanwhile, [SSL International](#) PLC paid Dawn Miceli and her husband Drew Domkus -- the pair behind a popular, and raunchy, podcast called "The Dawn and Drew Show" -- to talk about its Durex condoms and lubricants over 10 episodes. The Durex sponsorship was disclosed.

It is difficult to say just how popular the steamy broadcasts are. iTunes recently listed "Open Source Sex" as the 21st most popular of the 6,000 podcasts in its directory -- ahead of podcasts from Newsweek, ESPN and ABC News. The Wall Street Journal Online also distributes a podcast through iTunes. Of the 100 top podcasts, 13 were recently marked as explicit, though some have nothing to do with sex, and earned the "explicit" label for using profanity.

In a June interview with ABC News, Apple Chief Executive Steve Jobs said of the iTunes podcast directory, "We're not allowing any pornography." Ms. Kerris declined to say how Apple defines audio porn, but she said Apple has removed podcasts that contain copyrighted material or were otherwise inappropriate.

Other technology companies have run into trouble over distribution of user-created content. In June, [Google](#) Inc. launched a video service that allows people to submit their own clips, but it has removed pornography and other adult content. Earlier that month, [Yahoo](#) Inc. closed down all of its user-created chat rooms after advocacy groups blamed it for allowing chats that promoted sex with minors.

Podcasters argue that by labeling their shows as "explicit," they should be free to say whatever they want. "I don't have to censor my language or anyone else's language," said Ms. Blue of "Open Source Sex." "It's like the dog is off the leash."

Ms. Miceli and Mr. Domkus agree. "The Dawn and Drew Show" became the talk of podcasting Web sites in November, when the couple, 28 and 33 years old, pretended to have sex. At one point during the broadcast, Mr. Domkus asks timidly, "Are we breaking any rules?" Ms. Miceli replies, "What rules?"

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